

Message Text

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SUBJECT: PROPOSAL FOR US-SOVIET COOPERATION ON
EMERGENCY MEDICAL EVACUATIONS FROM LITTLE DIOMEDE

REF: STATE 067714

1. EMBASSY WILL RECALL BACKGROUND ON THIS PROBLEM
(REFTEL AND PREVIOUS). WE NOW PROPOSE TO TRY TO MOVE
THE SOVIETS. THIS CABLE RECAPS ESSENTIAL FACTORS AND
REQUESTS THAT EMBASSY APPROACH MFA.

2. US HEALTH AUTHORITIES HAVE LONG BEEN CONCERNED OVER
INABILITY TO PROVIDE EMERGENCY EVACUATION MOST OF YEAR
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FOR ALASKAN NATIVES ON US TERRITORY OF LITTLE DIOMEDE
ISLAND IN BERING STRAIT. SEA ROUTE IS OFTEN DANGEROUS
AND ISLAND GEOGRAPHY WILL NOT PERMIT CONSTRUCTION OF AN
AIRPORT. USE OF AIRPORT ON NEARBY SOVIET ISLAND OF
BIG DIOMEDE (OSTROV RATMANOVA) IS AN ATTRACTIVE
THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVE.

3. THESE TWO ISLANDS ARE LESS THAN THREE MILES APART. WHILE BOTH ISLANDS HAVE BEEN INHABITED BY SMALL NATIVE POPULATIONS, THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT HAS RELOCATED THE NATIVES OF BIG DIOMEDE, LEAVING ONLY A SMALL GOVERNMENT INSTALLATION WHICH IS MANNED YEAR-ROUND BY SOVIET TECHNICIANS. THERE IS A NATIVE VILLAGE ON LITTLE DIOMEDE OF APPROXIMATELY 100 INHABITANTS.

4. POSSIBLE COOPERATION HAS BEEN RAISED WITH THE SOVIETS SPORADICALLY IN PAST YEARS IN A PACKAGE OF ISSUES CONNECTED WITH FACILITATING LOCAL CROSS-BORDER TRAVEL OF US AND SOVIET ESKIMOS IN THE BERING STRAIT AREA. THE SOVIETS IN 1975 TURNED DOWN CATEGORICALLY A US PROPOSAL FOR SIMPLIFIED PROCEDURES FOR RECIPROCAL VISITS BY US AND SOVIET ESKIMOS.

5. IN MAY 1977, ADDRESSING ONLY MEDICAL COOPERATION, DR. S. PAUL EHRLICH OF HEW WITH DEPARTMENT'S CONCURRENCE APPROACHED DEPUTY MINISTER OF HEALTH VENEDICTOV AT THE WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY IN GENEVA, SUGGESTING THAT EMERGENCY MEDICAL ACCESS TO THE ALASKAN NATIVES OF LITTLE DIOMEDE BE DISCUSSED WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE US-USSR AGREEMENT ON HEALTH COOPERATION. VENEDICTOV RESPONDED THAT BORDER CROSSING ISSUES NECESSITATED MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS APPROVAL BEFORE SUCH DISCUSSIONS COULD COMMENCE--HE SUGGESTED WE RAISE MATTER LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THROUGH DIPLOMATIC CHANNELS.

6. IF EMBASSY PERCEIVES NO OBJECTION PLEASE SEEK APPOINTMENT TO DELIVER NOTE OR AIDE MEMOIRE ON LINES TEXT GIVEN PARA 7 BELOW. YOU SHOULD CONVEY TO SOVIETS THAT OUR PRINCIPAL AND ONLY INTEREST IS TO MEET EMERGENCY HEALTH NEEDS OF ALASKAN NATIVES. WE WOULD THEREFORE BE FLEXIBLE IN ARRANGMENTS TO SUIT SOVIETS IF THEY AGREE TO HELP IN THIS HUMANITARIAN PROJECT. FOR EXAMPLE, WE WOULD BE PLEASED TO CONSIDER USE OF SOVIET AIRCRAFT AS OPPOSED TO US AIRCRAFT FOR SHUTTLE FROM BIG DIOMEDE TO MAINLAND.

7. (BEGIN TEXT).
THE EMBASSY REFERS TO RECENT INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN AMERICAN AND SOVIET OFFICIALS UNDER THE US-USSR AGREEMENT ON COOPERATION IN MEDICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH AND REQUESTS CONSIDERATION BY THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF A PROPOSAL FOR HEALTH COOPERATION IN THE AREA OF BIG AND LITTLE DIOMEDE ISLANDS IN THE BERING STRAIT.

THE MATTER INVOLVES THE VERY DIFFICULT EMERGENCY HEALTH SITUATIONS FACED BY THE APPROXIMATELY 100 ALASKAN NATIVES LIVING ON LITTLE DIOMEDE ISLAND. ADVERSE WEATHER CONDITIONS MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO TRANSPORT PATIENTS BY SEA FROM THE ISLAND TO THE MAINLAND MUCH OF THE YEAR. AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF LITTLE DIOMEDE DOES NOT ALLOW CONSTRUCTION OF A PERMANENT AIRFIELD. IN THESE

CIRCUMSTANCES, IT CAN BE IMPOSSIBLE TO EVACUATE A PATIENT SUFFERING FROM SUCH EMERGENCIES AS SERIOUS BURNS OR APPENDICITIS FOR TREATMENT AT A HOSPITAL IN ALASKA.

IN CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE MEANS FOR EMERGENCY MEDICAL EVACUATIONS, WE HAVE NOTED THAT THE GREATER SIZE OF LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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BIG DIOMEDE ALLOWS FOR AIR OPERATIONS MOST OF THE YEAR, AND THAT THE SHORT STRETCH OF WATER BETWEEN BIG AND LITTLE DIOMEDE CAN BE RELATIVELY EASILY TRAVERSED. THUS, THE ROUTE FROM LITTLE DIOMEDE BY SEA TO BIG DIOMEDE AND THENCE BY AIR TO THE ALASKA MAINLAND WOULD APPEAR USABLE IN MANY INSTANCES WHEN IT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE TO EVACUATE QUICKLY ENOUGH BY THE DIRECT SEA ROUTE FROM LITTLE DIOMEDE TO ALASKA. EVACUATION IS NORMALLY TO NOME OR WALES IN ALASKA.

WITH THE ABOVE SITUATION IN MIND, THE EMBASSY WOULD ASK THE MINISTRY'S FAVORABLE CONSIDERATION OF ESTABLISHING PROCEDURES FOR EMERGENCY EVACUATION OF LITTLE DIOMEDE PATIENTS VIA BIG DIOMEDE BY AIR WHEN ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES PRECLUDE ALTERNATIVE DIRECT EVACUATION FROM LITTLE DIOMEDE TO THE ALASKAN MAINLAND. US REPRESENTATIVES WILL BE PLEASED TO DISCUSS DETAILS OF POSSIBLE PROCEDURES AND CONDITIONS AT THE MINISTRY'S CONVENIENCE.

THE HUMANITARIAN NATURE OF THE COOPERATION PROPOSED ABOVE IS SELF-EVIDENT. IN THIS CONNECTION, THE EMBASSY ALSO NOTES THE LONG AND OUTSTANDING RECORD OF COOPERATION IN HEALTH MATTERS BETWEEN OUR TWO COUNTRIES, AND THE EXTENSIVE EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDED IN RECENT YEARS BY THE ALASKA NATIVE MEDICAL CENTER TO SOVIET MARITIME PERSONNEL (24 SOVIET PATIENTS WERE GIVEN EMERGENCY TREATMENT FROM 1970 TO 1976). THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE FOR LITTLE DIOMEDE NATIVES WOULD FURTHER ENHANCE OUR HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF HEALTH. (END TEXT).

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